

FIRST PLACE WINNER

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Do you know those people? The ones who sit curled up in a blanket that I couldn't imagine ever using, for it is so old and worn it barely warms. Or the ones who hold the signs saying "Help, food, money, please." Maybe for you it's the person who stands on the street corner with a tin for change. Walking in downtown Seattle, a pedestrian is guaranteed to pass a homeless person. When I was smaller I couldn't do it. I would hold onto my mother's hand tightly, scared, not wanting to think about it. But now, I am not a little girl, and I can't just turn my back and try to forget. I have to do something.

Dr. Martin Luther King left a legacy in the hearts and minds of America. He left a feeling of courage and sacrifice for doing what is right. He said, "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness." Dr. King says that it is of our responsibility to make the personal choice of whether or not to be the person who takes actions not just for themselves, but also for other people. He left a legacy stating that any work, no matter the size, is important and can bring equality and change.

Sometimes speaking up can be the small thing a person does to create change. My mom used to teach high school. Talking with other teachers, she would hear comments and assumptions about students based on their racial or economic background. My mother would hear other teachers making assumptions, saying things like, "Oh that boy won't graduate," or "It won't be long until she drops out." It's easy to just hear it and let it pass by, easy to stand there and let the comments pass over. But in order to bring equality or change, people need to stand up and challenge those assumption. We all have to speak out because the world and society is not going to change on its own. Ever since

her experience at the high school, my mom makes sure that she doesn't let those comments go unchallenged. It may seem like a small thing, but something as simple as challenging assumptions can make a difference. Dr. King taught us that all work is important. He said that no matter the size, hard work can bring equality and change.

Just like my mother's experience, I have encountered many stereotypes and assumptions in my life. I recently participated in cooking and serving food at Angelines, a shelter for homeless and low income women. Before cooking, John, the owner of the restaurant spoke to us and said that the most important part of this community service project is dignity. Many of the women we served have low self esteem and lack feelings of importance. John told us that we should cook and prepare food at the highest quality, because treating these women with dignity and importance uplifts the way they view themselves. "All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence."

The next day we arrived at Angelines to serve. While on the tour of the facility, I noticed that many women had their heads in their hands, or stood muttering at a wall. "Most women here suffered from mental illness," the manager told us. I felt a squeeze on my hand and looked down to see a nervous sixth grader holding it. Heads were bowed, not wanting to make eye contact. Soon women sat down at tables and each of us started serving food. As the meal progressed, more and more of us started to relax. I looked around to see a sea of hugs, high-fives, and smiles. The sixth grader who once clutched my hand was smiling and introducing herself.

At the end of the day I walked to our car and saw a woman carrying a sign that read, "anything helps" looked up at me, her eyes desperate. I smiled back, something I

didn't do on the way in. That small fear in the pit of my stomach was gone. I had defeated my earlier assumptions and stereotypes of the homeless through my work at Angelines. After doing something small like serving a meal, I realized that sometimes an act as simple as smiling back can create a small change.

It is important that society remembers humanity and dignity because it doesn't matter one's race or religion. That doesn't make any human superior to another. A person creates equality by simply acknowledging that homeless man on the street instead of turning a blind eye. One is creating equality by losing their assumptions of other people that are different than themselves. In order to have any change in the world, we must use Dr.King's legacy to inspire us to believe that any work is helpful, even the simple act of smiling.

Bibliography

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